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Posted on Wed, Mar. 16, 2005

Senate group pushes to restore more than \$1 billion in Amtrak cuts

The move seeks to fend off administration plans to dismantle much of a system it calls wasteful.

By Chris Mondics
Inquirer Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON - In a bid to head off a White House plan to dismantle and privatize much of Amtrak, Senate Democrats yesterday pushed for legislation to restore more than \$1 billion President Bush has proposed cutting from its budget.

Supporters of the measure said the White House plan would strand both urban commuters and re flung rural regions. Mostly Democrats, the backers included Sens. Jon Corzine and Frank Lauten Jersey, and Sen. Tom Carper of Delaware. Republican Sens. Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania and of Rhode Island also signed on as cosponsors.

"The intent of the administration and some in Congress is not to improve inter-city rail service," said not about promoting economic growth, reducing road congestion, or promoting American commerce ideological and it is wrong."

Bush proposed in February that Amtrak's federal funding be eliminated and the rail line be placed a prelude to restructuring. While the White House had proposed sharp funding cuts in the past, it suggested bankruptcy.

That tactic appears to have galvanized Amtrak supporters, who say it would disrupt service for international passengers and local mass-transit trains that run on Amtrak lines.

"The idea of putting Amtrak into bankruptcy to reform it just doesn't make sense," Corzine said.

The White House has released few details of its proposal. Based on comments by Transportation

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Norman Y. Mineta, it appears to be modeled on a 2003 plan - which died from lack of support - under which the federal government would have ended Amtrak operating subsidies in favor of grants to the states for tracks, bridges, and other rail infrastructure.

States would have had the option of joining with one another to provide long-distance service, and with private companies to run the trains. But they would have had to shoulder some operating costs, being that well-patronized long-distance lines would survive while state governments would abandon marginal ones.

The current amendment, introduced by Sen. Robert Byrd (D., W.Va.), would provide \$1.4 billion for the next fiscal year. Byrd said the government could raise the money by closing corporate tax loopholes.

A spokeswoman said late yesterday that Sen. Rick Santorum (R., Pa.) had not yet taken a position on the amendment.

Earlier in the day, Corzine joined Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York, Carper, Max Baucus of Montana, Democrats - and Chafee at a rally at Washington's Union Station to oppose the cuts.

Amtrak has long been sharply criticized by fiscal conservatives for running an outdated rail line that does not respond to public transportation needs and makes inefficient use of scarce transportation money.

Service on some of its lines is poor and often far more expensive than flying, critics contend.

The rail line provides thousands of jobs and in some Western states is the only feasible mode of mass transit for the elderly and the young. It is also popular in the Northeast, where trains between Washington and New York are packed.

That translates into political support from a diverse Capitol Hill coalition that includes Republicans in the Northeast and Democrats in the Northeast. And that coalition so far has been successful in blocking attempts to cut Amtrak service.

The Senate was expected to vote on Byrd's amendment today.

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